

Stambaugh Auditorium Organ Series: catching up with Christopher Houlihan

by Daniel Hathaway



New York-based organist Christopher Houlihan returns to the restored E.M. Skinner organ at Youngstown's Stambaugh Auditorium on Sunday, April 23 at 4:00 pm for a program of music by Louis Vierne, Olivier Messiaen, J.S. Bach, and César Franck.

Houlihan is well-known in Northeast Ohio, having played Bach, Franck, and Vierne at Stambaugh in November 2012, Vierne and Liszt at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland

Heights in April 2013, and most recently, Bach, Franck, and Vierne at Christ Presbyterian Church in Canton on March 19 of this year.

That repertoire list gives a big hint about Houlihan's musical tastes, which run heavily toward French Romantic music, a national tradition the organist imbibed first-hand during a year he spent in Paris serving as assistant organist at the American Cathedral. His close kinship to Louis Vierne, the famous organist of Notre-Dame, inspired "Vierne 2012," a tour in which he performed all six of the composer's symphonies in a single day in each of six American cities. "I was so happy that audiences responded to this colorful, fun music that I love so much," Houlihan said in an earlier [interview](#) with *ClevelandClassical.com*. "People who thought that the organ is a cold, remote, or spooky instrument found that it grabbed their hearts."

The organist is good at grabbing hearts. "Canton was amazing," Houlihan said in a recent telephone conversation. "Not only was there a good-sized audience, but the listeners were incredibly focused, attentive, and quiet. People were really paying attention, and you could feel the energy in that room."

Houlihan looks forward to working that kind of charm again next Sunday in Youngstown, in cahoots with an instrument he greatly admires. “In 2012, Franck and Vierne felt so much at home on that instrument with all its amazing, rich, orchestral sounds.”

The Stambaugh Skinner dates from 1926, nine years before Vierne died. Its restoration in 2009-2010 by the A. Thompson-Allen Company of New Haven brought the instrument back to pristine condition — adding no modern technology to its stop-selecting system. That means that organists have only four presets to use in setting registrations for an entire recital.



“In a kind of masochistic way, I enjoy the challenge,” Houlihan said, brightly. “Organists have to be incredibly flexible. The same piece on two organs can be vastly different to manage. You really have to plan which button you’re going to hit with which limb to change stops.”

Houlihan’s program includes three excerpts from Vierne’s Second Symphony. “I loved playing the symphonies whole in 2012, and I have mixed feelings about extracting movements,” he said. “It’s like chapters in a book — they’re much better in context. But these movements stand well on their own, and Vierne himself often played excerpts.”

The Bach work at Stambaugh will be the great *Fantasia and Fugue in g*, which appears on the organist’s recently-released album, *Christopher Houlihan Plays Bach*, [reviewed](#) last month in these pages. “I’m really proud of that CD, and it’s gotten some really good notices,” he said. “It’s different from most Bach recordings these days, but it’s the way I wanted to play Bach on that particular day, on that particular instrument.”

The Bach album, which appears on the Azica label, was recorded over three nights in the chapel of Trinity College in Hartford, CT, where Houlihan studied as an undergraduate and where he now serves as artist in residence. “The first night is usually spent setting microphones and getting balances right,” he said. “I’m envious of musicians who can just go into a studio. With the organ, it’s ten times harder.”

Since our last interview, Houlihan has taken on more extensive duties at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Apostles in New York, where he serves as music director. “It’s been very rewarding because they love music so much. I’m there most Sundays, but I get to be away to play recitals as much as I need to.” He plays a Dutch organ by van den Heuvel that was originally built for a private home in Texas, then sold to the church. “It has two enclosed divisions, bells, celestes, and a lot of things you wouldn’t expect from a small, three-manual organ.”

In addition to his forthcoming recital appearances, Christopher Houlihan is eagerly awaiting the arrival of a new work by Hannah Lash which he’ll premiere in Jacksonville in June. It’s not his first commissioned work. “In 2013, Patrick Green composed *Steel Symphony* for me, based on sculptures in a park in Massachusetts — monsters that come to life,” he said. He’s also contemplating his next recording, but don’t ask him what he has in mind for repertoire. His lips are sealed.

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